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THE YELLOW MEN OF CENTRAL AFRICA

By SAMUEL P. VERNER

The fact that there are large numbers of indigenes in the remote parts of the African continent whose skin is of bright copper color and whose physiognomy is quite different from that of the typical negro, is one comparatively little known to men of science, and is a source of surprise to the general public, although students of African anthropology and explorers of the interior of the continent are well aware of its occurrence. In my journeyings in the great Congo-Zambezi region I found many of these yellow people and became interested in their character and history. I have already described¹ the appearance and character of my friend Ndombe, "king" of the Baschilange, who was one of the finest types of these light-colored men; but I have not yet recorded the facts connected with this phenomenon nor discussed the possible reasons for it.

These yellow people of Central Africa are not detached tribes, but are families scattered throughout many different tribes. It is safe to say that at least fifteen percent of the entire population of Central Africa (which perhaps numbers 65,000,000) are light colored. To put it comparatively, there are as many yellow Africans in Central Africa as there are negroes in the United States. I did not find a single tribe without some of these yellow individuals, or, most frequently, families, included in its membership.

One noteworthy feature of these people is the extent of their geographical distribution. They are found all over Central and South Africa from the central Soudan to the Cape. They are found in relatively larger numbers in the more elevated parts of the country, especially in the headlands about the sources of the Nile, the Congo, and the Zambesi. So far as my observation went, these copper-colored people are confined to the Bantu division of the African race, but I do not think that this is exclusively the rule. They

¹ *Atlantic Monthly*, August, 1902.

live in the villages with the blacks, and in nowise seem to separate themselves into distinct political or social groups. For example, the uncle, and highly respected prime minister of the yellow king Ndombe, was Joka, whose skin was of a veritable ebon hue. The color did not seem to be a cause of geographical segregation at all.

A typical yellow African of pure indigenous character is usually tall, inclined to be slender, with large, bright, brown eyes and rather aquiline nose (the aquilinity greatly modified, however, from the norm), much smaller hands and feet than the other Africans, kinky hair, and oily skin. His bearing is usually more dignified than that of the blacks, and his general appearance much handsomer.

The physiognomy of these men differs from that of the negroes in being more Semitic in character; at the same time there is every difference between them and the Arabs. They have high cheekbones, and the facial angle is much nearer the perpendicular than that of any other Africans. The head is usually dolichocephalic, thus showing the true African classification of the type, but this is strongly modified by an unusual width transversely, so that some of them are almost as brachycephalic as the Caucasian. Ndombe's head, for example, was nearly as wide as long.

Technologically the yellow men seem superior to the others; their arts and industries are more advanced and their skill greater. For example, the Zappo-Zaps, a tribe which has more copper-colored members than any other observed by me, are far more advanced in blacksmithing, carpentry, weaving, etc., than other tribes, and they imitate the white men more readily and successfully. The customs and institutions of the yellow men are also more highly developed and their methods of government better organized. Thus Ndombe, a yellow Mukuba, encouraged his people in adjusting themselves to the introduction of foreign civilization; while Lukengu, a black potentate of the same tribe, positively resisted all progress, and was finally killed because of his ultra-conservatism.

The bright-colored Africans are also generally more intelligent, of a more sensitive nervous organism, less emotional but more

vivacious, and much more apt to cherish resentment. They are quicker in motion, and they seem to have a far livelier sense of humor; they are also more sensitive to pain and less capable of prolonged endurance or privation.

Of one thing I became thoroughly convinced—the color of these Africans is not the result of any recent admixture of white blood. The yellow men are descendants of other yellow men for many generations, probably for many centuries. This is supported by several points of evidence. The traditions of the colored men indicate no white ancestry; and owing to their remarkable powers of memory, the careful preservation of tradition, its transmission as a sacred possession to posterity, and the pride with which the Afro-Caucasian of mixed blood always refers to any known white ancestry, this traditionary testimony of an unmixed descent for hundreds of years is of considerable value. Moreover, the history of African exploration, which is full and accurate, clearly shows no white residents for centuries in many parts of the continent where these yellow people have long resided. Again, there are no ethnic residua of white influence save of the most remote character, which will be discussed presently. A peculiar fact in this connection is that the color of the copper-hued Africans is not at all that of the mulatto or other degree of Caucasian mixture; their color is quite *sui generis*—of a curiously reddish tinge, somewhat like that of the American Indian, which the careful observer can readily distinguish from the other. For example, there were in my employ two copper-colored lads, one of whom was partly Portuguese, the other wholly African; yet the only external difference, so far as the skin was concerned, was this peculiar reddish tinge.

The question naturally arises, Whence the color of these millions of light Africans in the depths of the Dark Continent? This is one of the most difficult problems in the entire field of African anthropology. Like the question of the origin of their remarkable neighbors, the pygmies, the mystery of the development of these yellow men is both ancient and profound. Some light may be thrown on the problem, however, as the result of special research.

The attitude of these yellow people toward the other Africans is one enlightening circumstance. They consider themselves superior.

They do not like to marry black women, though they may have them for concubines. The tendency toward the perpetuation of the yellow type by natural selection is very strong indeed. The yellow men are generally regarded with a curious degree of respect, not to say envy, by the blacks, whose numerical superiority has never sufficed either to subdue or to assimilate their more favored cousins. It is worthy of note, also, that the children of typical yellow parents are physically strong, while the offspring of the black concubines of yellow men are relatively weak.

While the history of the African tribes is far from well known, the consensus of scientific opinion is that Africa was originally settled through migrations from Asia. At the same time, the fact that some of the aboriginal Asiatics were not only black in color but resembled some of the African types in many other respects, tends to forbid the hypothesis of entire local variation after settlement in Africa.

There are four reasonable hypotheses concerning the origin of the light-colored aborigines of Central Africa which may here be considered. These are (1) spontaneous evolution, (2) local variation, (3) recent admixture of foreign blood, and (4) ancient admixture of foreign blood.

The hypothesis of spontaneous evolution surmises that the copper-colored Africans are a higher development from the native black races. This hypothesis involves the whole theory of evolution, a discussion of which is not possible here.

The first hypothesis would be untenable without the support of the second. The supposition that local variation might account for the lightening of the color has one factor in its favor—that the light-colored Africans inhabit principally the more elevated portions of the continent. At the same time it is true that the blackest of Africans are also found in the highlands, with no apparent disposition to sequester themselves into the lower and warmer regions. Then, too, the pygmies, evidently the oldest of the African races, are very dark colored, and they, too, often inhabit the mountainous country.

That there has been an introduction of alien blood by which this extraordinary color of so many Africans was effected seems quite

likely ; but the time of its occurrence is not so easily asserted. It might be held that the admixture has been comparatively recent ; but there are only three ways in which modern variation could have occurred — from the mongrel semi-whites of northern Africa, from the heterogeneous white slave-traders of the coasts, and from the ubiquitous Portuguese. The first supposition is a most reasonable one, for there is little doubt that the people of northern Africa have done much to vary the color of the inhabitants of the interior, but it is hardly adequate for an explanation of all the points at issue. The second supposition — that the slave-traders effected the change — is barred by the fact that the Niger and Guinea regions, where the slave-trade reached its highest development, has the fewest of these copper-colored Africans — scarcely any at all, indeed. The third — that the Portuguese, who were long the most indefatigable of European pioneers in Africa, were responsible for this result — is the most probable of these suppositions as to a modern origin of the yellow Bantu ; but the vast number and the wide geographical distribution of the yellow people precludes the probability of their origin from this cause ; besides, the fact that the Africans on the Portuguese coasts, who are known to be Portuguese half-breeds, are entirely different from, and vastly inferior to, the people under discussion.

The fourth hypothesis is the most reasonable of all — that the light color of these Africans is derived from an ancient admixture of foreign blood. This is rendered probable by several considerations.

It must be conceded that skin-color is largely influenced by climate and custom. As one passes from the north temperate zone to the equator the races are found to become darker. Of course, ages have been required to produce this variation, and it would take a proportionately long time to effect any further variation — a change from dark to light and *vice versa* — with no radical introduction of foreign elements. African ethnology amply illustrates this. The older tribes, for example, are the darker — the pygmies never exhibit a light color at all. The black dolichocephalic negroes come next in infrequency of light skin ; then come those Africans in whose character and cult alike are evidences that they have not

been residents of the interior as long as the others. Among these last the copper-hued people are frequent.

Again, there is evidence that there have been three general successive migrations of people into Africa from the northeast, the region of the Nile and the Red Sea. Of these, the first settled Egypt and may have passed southward; the second built the pyramids; the third occurred after the rise of Muhammed and produced effects still discernible, though the immigrants are not yet crystallized as a distinct ethnic stratum. Each migration-group was probably lighter in color than the preceding one, and the commingling of the descendants of later comers with the offspring of the earlier groups would suffice to produce at least six distinct ethnic classes, with many more subsequently formed. All of these classes may be seen in the tribes of Africa today.